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AUTHOR Imel, Susan
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ABSTRACT

A number of factors and trends contribute to an increase in older adults in the workforce including demographics, financial concerns, changing concepts of retirement, longer and healthier life spans, and demand for the knowledge and skills possessed by the current generation of older workers. Careers are now considered to be more fluid, nonlinear and unstable and the later career stage can be a period of growth, maintenance, or decline. Adults in late midlife are a diverse group with varied career development needs such as the opportunity to change jobs within an organization, learn new skills or use their skills in different ways. These five suggestions can provide some direction both to older adults and to those assisting them with their career development: (1) acknowledge that careers belong to individuals; (2) learn how to find and use career information; (3) prepare for unplanned disruptions in careers; (4) provide role models for older employees; and (5) view career from a holistic and connected perspective. More research and theory development are needed to understand fully what career development interventions are appropriate for older adults. (Contains 15 references.) (CG)

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Susan Imel

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**ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090**

Career Development of Older Adults

Adults in late midlife are a diverse group with varied career development needs. The old adage "30 years and out" no longer applies to the careers of many adults. The definition of retirement is changing due to changes workers are making in the later part of their careers (Rix 2002, p. 27). Large numbers of adults do choose retirement, but for many, retirement is a means of embarking on a new career. Others remain in the work force, either voluntarily or because they do not have sufficient resources to allow them to retire. Still others lose their jobs involuntarily and need to seek employment opportunities that will provide a bridge to a new career or to retirement. Following discussions of current trends and changing career concepts, this *Digest* describes how information from research and theory can be used to address the career development needs of late midlife adults.

Current Trends

Older workers have prospered in the recent economic downturn (Uchitelle 2003, p. A1). Currently, workers aged 55-64 account for 12% of the nation's workers, an increase of nearly 2% since 2000 (*ibid.*), and by 2010, nearly one in three workers will be at least age 55 (Rix 2002). A number of factors and trends are contributing to the increase in older adults in the work force including demographics, financial concerns, changing concepts of retirement, longer and healthier life spans, and demand for the knowledge and skills possessed by the current generation of older workers (Goldberg 2000; Montenegro et al. 2002; Rix 2002; Uchitelle 2003).

Older adults in the work force are not the only ones who remain engaged in productive activities. Many adults who have retired look for expanded opportunities and options—either paid or unpaid—that may represent "a new chapter in life embodying a new definition of success" (Freedman 2002, online). For these older adults, retirement represents another stage of life—which may extend for as much as 25 years—in which to accomplish many things (Welch et al. 2003). Because they have differing abilities, desires, and needs in terms of both paid and unpaid work, adults in late midlife are not homogeneous (Goldberg 2000; Rix 2002). As a group, however, they typify some of the changing conceptions of career.

Changing Conceptions of Career

Once thought to be linear in nature with a natural progression "up the ladder," careers are now considered to be much more fluid, nonlinear, and unstable (Hall 2002; Moen 1998; Riverin-Simard 2000). Individuals are much more responsible for managing their own careers and there is a blurring of the boundaries between family and career (Hall 2002; Moen 1998). A study (Montenegro et al. 2002) of workers aged 45-75, for example, found that for many—particularly those who are baby boomers—juggling family and career "dominates their views and decisions about work" (p. 2).

Even career stages, once thought to be fairly predictable, are being reexamined, revealing that in the middle and later career years, individuals' needs and career concerns change more dynamically than in the past and continuous learning is required for success. In theory, the late career stage has traditionally meant adjustment into retirement but in current practice job involvement continues, with little or no

physical decline evident. Depending on the individual and the organization, the later career stage can be a period of growth, maintenance, or decline (Hall 2002).

A study of more than 900 adults documents the dynamics of careers after age 40. The study findings revealed five career phases (adapted from Riverin-Simard 2000, pp. 117-118):

- In phase one, adults in their mid-40s experienced a break with the past and gained a new understanding of their goals, their vocational identities, and links between their work and private lives.
- In the second phase, at the beginning of the 50s, a new career departure was more evident as career transitions occurred and adults made appropriate modifications because they had an understanding of their goals.
- In phase three, adults in their mid-50s began seeking a promising departure from the job market by engaging in new goals that were linked to these departures.
- Phase four found adults in their 60s experiencing a career transition that was characterized by great rupture and they began dreaming of other kinds of activities to fulfill their goals.
- When adults were in their mid-60s, they entered the final phase that included the inevitability of retirement and the need to face a definitive departure from their career. At this point, they began integrating personal characteristics that had been in opposition to their vocational identities.

Through continuous redefinition, adults in the study were able to maintain a vocational identity, although this identity was not necessarily linked to having a job (*ibid.*).

Changing concepts of careers coupled with trends related to paid and unpaid work of older adults indicate that late midlife adults can still benefit from career development interventions. Existing models of career development, however, may not address their needs (Hall 2002; Riverin-Simard 2000).

Addressing the Career Development Needs of Older Adults

The diversity of adults in late midlife demands diversity in addressing their needs for career development. In her study of the postgraduation transition needs of women who completed an undergraduate degree after the age of 60, for example, Butler (2002) found preferences for either paid or unpaid activity in the following arenas:

- The creative, including writing, painting, and music
- The generative, including mentoring, tutoring, or working with the elderly
- The rendering of service, including serving as community volunteers, docents in historical homes, and library board members

Although career planning had not been a priority for the majority of study participants when they entered college, for most that changed sometime during the period they were in college. For many, finding jobs was not important but discovering how to use their skills in different or new ways was.

Older adults who remain in or return to the work force may have other types of career development needs such as the opportunity to change jobs within the organization or to learn new skills (Rocco et al. 2001). Role models, for example, can be just as important for older employees as for younger ones. Gibson and Barron (2003) found that many older employees used multiple role models to learn new skills. Although the majority of these role models were at a higher level in the organization, most were younger than the employee. Older workers who choose retirement can benefit from learning about opportunities beyond retirement (Rocco et al. 2001).

Clearly, multiple responses are needed to address the career development needs of older adults. The following general suggestions can provide some direction to both older adults and those assisting them with their career development.

- **Acknowledge that careers belong to individuals.** Although older adults may receive assistance from individuals or organizations with either career planning or with the provision of career development activities, they need to understand that they are in charge of and own their careers (Hall 2002). Individuals can be encouraged to think about their careers in terms of employability rather than as employment, with employability representing the shift of responsibility for career from the organization to the individual (Marshall and Bonner 2003).
- **Because a key element in successful career development is access to information, learn how to find and use career information.** This skill will enable older adults to understand the broad range of opportunities available to them and to make informed choices (Brewington and Nassar-McMillan 2000).
- **Prepare for unplanned disruptions in careers** by developing an understanding that change and instability are not negative and learning to anticipate both (ibid.; Riverin-Simard 2000).
- **Provide role models for older employees.** Older workers can increase their adaptability through the use of role models who can help them learn new skills and serve as models for making changes in their work identity (Gibson and Barron 2003).
- **View career from a holistic and connected perspective,** rather than thinking of it as a fragmented entity separate from other aspects of life. Hansen's (2001) model called Integrative Life Planning is based on six critical life tasks: (1) finding work that needs doing in the changing global context; (2) weaving one's life into a meaningful whole; (3) connecting family and work; (4) valuing pluralism and inclusivity; (5) managing personal transitions and organizational change; and (6) exploring spirituality, purpose, and meaning. The approach to career development suggested by this model can help older adults understand that their vocational identity does not need to be linked to a job (Riverin-Simard 2000).

Conclusion

The career development of older adults is an area that needs further development. Traditional theories of career development are being recast to fit contemporary workplaces, but the bulk of research has focused on early career stages (Gibson and Barron 2003). Clearly, more research and theory development are needed to understand fully what career development interventions are appropriate for older adults.

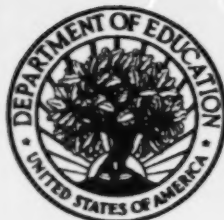
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**Center on Education and Training
for Employment**
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus OH 43210-1090

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